

Tips for New Coaches

Speaking the Language

If you are brand new to this activity, there are a lot of different acronyms and organizations that are involved in speech and debate. The sheer number can be overwhelming. A good starter list is below:

National Speech and Debate Association (NSDA): This is the worldwide governing body for speech & debate. All tournaments run under the auspices of the NSDA. One of the very first things you should do as a coach is go to the NSDA website and create your team, making yourself the advisor. If your school has previously had a team, you may need to contact the NSDA and ask them to change the advisor to you, particularly if the former advisor no longer works at the school.

Arizona Speech and Debate Coaches Association (ASDCA): This is the local (“district”, in NSDA parlance) organization. The ASDCA will be your main point of contact for almost all tournaments. Within the ASDCA, your school will be categorized as either Division 1 (big schools) or Division 2 (small schools). Each division has its own set of four representatives, who, along with the ASDCA executive members make up the board.

Arizona Interscholastic Association (AIA): The ASDCA is an activity that belongs under the large AIA umbrella. If you are a traditional public school, you are likely an AIA member and somebody at your school (often the athletic director) is your school’s main AIA liaison. If you are a charter or private school, you may not be an AIA member. **You do NOT need to be an AIA member to compete in speech & debate** with the exception of the state tournament at the end of each season.

Tabroom: While technically not an organization, all tournaments are run through Tabroom. Tabroom is the tournament-running software endorsed by the NSDA to handle pretty much everything. You will need a Tabroom account, and you will want to link it to your NSDA account. All students will need NSDA accounts and Tabroom accounts as well in order to compete, and you will need to link them. There is a [Tabroom help center](#) which has all kind of useful tips.

All of those are very useful, but one more resource specifically for new coaches is the Program Support Committee (PSC). Through the PSC, you are eligible to receive a lot of additional help at getting your program started, including some grant money for the first couple of years as your program gets off the ground. You can find contact info for current PSC members on the ASDCA website or reach the PSC via email at asdcasprogsupcomm@gmail.com.

Finally, the NSDA has a whole host of new coach resources that can be found [here](#). There’s a lot there and it can be a bit overwhelming, but it’s a good place to visit and there’s tons of info there.

Tips for Running a Program

Recruitment

Finding students that want to do speech & debate requires students to know what speech & debate is about. A broad overview of the benefits to students can be seen at [this link](#).

Some good places to look for students that want to join the team is clubs that are similar in nature such as Mock Trial, Model UN, or even Academic Decathlon. Likewise, theater kids tend to be well suited for speech events. Although, tread carefully here- the theater teacher at your school can run the gamut anyway from being pro-speech & debate to not knowing anything about it to being anti-speech & debate. (The reasons are complicated) Feel them out and see if they will either help you recruit, or at the very least be neutral to your recruitment, if you want to recruit theater kids.

Learn your school rules

The school will have rules for:

- Students driving themselves
- Arranging Transportation, types of vehicles / drivers you can have
- Overnight trips
- Checking kids out of school early
- Tournament behavior
- Chaperone requirements
- Expense / reimbursement / purchase order process

The athletic / assistant athletic / band director can be a great help, especially if they have been there a few years. Alternatively, if there are other schools with active teams in your district/charter organization see if you can contact those coaches for guidance.

On the flip side – be kind to your school’s administration. Some things they appreciate:

- Give them the tournament schedule soon as you can (the tournament calendar for the next season at the spring coaches meeting of the preceding season).
- Keep them up to date when the schedule changes.
- Let attendance know in advance who is out of school at a tournament.
- Keep them informed of the team’s successes and progress as the year goes on.
- Invite some teachers to judge at a tournament.
- Give a “showcase” performance for the school (also good for recruitment)

Financials

Many schools have “volunteers” or people in roles they are not best suited for. Whatever the reason your accounts will, at some stage, get totally messed up. Keep your own set of books, keep copies of all receipts, etc. The rear you save may be your own! Make a budget. What type of activity fee are you allowed to charge? Do you make use of the AZ tax credit? What expenses does the program cover vs. what do the kids have to pay for themselves? Will you do fundraising?

Event Tips

With the sheer number of events that exist in the speech & debate world, it can be overwhelming to know where to start. A broad overview of the AZ-focused events are below. Full descriptions can be found in the [NSDA Competition Events Guide](#).

Congress: This is often a good starting point for newer teams. Congress sessions are divided into individual houses that generally run between 15-20 kids. All speaking in Congress is optional- that is, students have to volunteer in order to speak. The houses will debate different bills over the course of each session, and a typical speech in favor or opposed to each bill runs about 3 minutes.

Debate: There are several types of debate- primarily Public Forum, Lincoln Douglas, and Policy. Of those three Public Forum is the most accessible. It is a partnered event, so there is not as much pressure on your debaters. Also, the judging obligation is much more manageable than a 1 v. 1 event like Lincoln Douglas. Policy is the most advanced type of debate of these three with extremely long rounds (1.5 hours vs. about 45 minutes for PF/LD).

Individual Events: These are often called the speech events and are very diverse. In broad strokes they fall into four categories. The time limit for all categories except Limited Prep is 10 minutes.

Platform: In this category, students write their own piece. Original Oratory (OO) speeches are persuasive while in Informative (Info) the speeches are meant to be informative but not advocating a specific idea or cause. Info pieces also have visual aids, and the price of those can rack up quickly. OO is a much more approachable category for the first-time platformer.

Interpretation: In this category, students can interpret any piece that is already published in some medium (print or online). Some types are Humorous Interp (HI), Dramatic Interp (DI), and Duo Interp (Duo). Students need to edit (“cut”) their piece into a 10-minute performance.

Black Book: This is a sub-category of Interp where students are allowed to have their piece in a black binder which they hold as they perform. The [Black Book Depot](#) is a good website to find said binders and the pages that fill them). The three primary events here are Prose, Poetry, and Program Oral Interp (POI). Both Poetry and POI require students to cut multiple sources into a single program

Limited Prep: In Impromptu (IMP) students will be given 7 minutes to write and deliver a speech after given a prompt, often a quote, in round. In Extemporaneous (EXT), students “draw” a topic 30 minutes before the round and then have to write and memorize a 7-minute speech. The topics in EXT tend to be more research-focused/debate-like, and students are allowed access to the internet during their prep time.

If you are a brand new coach, picking a few categories to focus on in your first year is generally a good bet. If you take time to become an expert in a small slate of events it will make things a lot more manageable in the early years of your team’s existence.

Tournament Tips

Let's start out with something that needs to be said- speech & debate tournaments can be very long. Most tournaments take two full days (Friday and Saturday), but as a new coach how much time your team spends at a tournament can depend on which events you choose. A broad overview is below.

Congress: Typically, there are two sessions of Congress that run Friday morning and Friday afternoon. The timeframe is about 7:30 AM – 3:00 PM.

Debate Events: Four preliminary rounds for debate run Friday afternoon (after Congress). Students with a winning record will “break” to elimination rounds (aka outrounds) on Saturday afternoon. A typical schedule runs from about 3:00 PM-9:00 PM Friday and then 12:00 PM-5:00 PM on Saturday for outrounds.

Individual Events: Preliminary rounds run Saturday morning, with outrounds running Saturday afternoon. A typical Saturday timeframe is 7:30 AM-8:30 PM.

If you are completely new, starting out with just doing individual events will ease the overall logistics of competing, as they only run on Saturday. Alternatively, just competing in Congress is also self-contained to one day and is not a bad place to start either. Debate events are more challenging because you may have to arrange transport/judging over multiple days. Students can sign up for multiple events (called “double entering”), but that’s generally only a good idea for more experienced kids.

All tournaments can be entered via signing up on Tabroom. A list of tournaments for the following season is generally decided on during the spring coaches convention meeting the previous year. Note that there are some tournaments that don’t follow the timetable outlined above, but most in Arizona (~80%) do. The tournament schedule can always be found on their Tabroom page.

Logistical Tips

It is very easy to forget something at tournaments. Here is a list of tips from the School of Hard Knocks...

- Make up a First Aid kit for the team table. Include Tylenol (or Ibuprofen), female hygiene products, cough drops, eye drops, band aids. (Find out the school policy for giving kids Tylenol).
- Bringing snacks is a good idea. While food is available for purchase most of the way through a tournament, it’s not a bad idea to have some on-the-go snacks for your team as sometimes time between rounds can get tight.
- Items to have on hand: a spare black book, paper, pens, stapler
- Insist kids **sign out** when they leave. Texting is OK. Otherwise you’re looking for them at 11PM on Saturday.
- Kids will leave lots of stuff behind.
- Pair up “newbies” with older team members for the first tournament.
- Get there early and learn the layout of the school.

Judging Tips

In addition to the various other requirements to run a speech & debate team, the one that derails the most programs is the ability to find judges. Teams are required to bring judges to meet their entry obligation. That obligation is approximately one judge per 2 entries in debate and 1 judge per 5 entries in individual events or Congress. Judges can be in multiple pools- that is, a judge could do Congress Friday morning, debate prelims Friday afternoon, and then individual events and debate outrounds on Saturday. The only restriction on that is a judge cannot be in multiple debate pools (say, PF and LD), although IE events all share a single pool. It's a lot of judging for a single person, but if you have a small team it's not a bad idea for you and/or an assistant coach to get at least some judging experience in any events your students compete in.

However, it's also a very good idea to get parents used to the idea that they are very likely going to have to give up a Friday and/or Saturday to judge a tournament their child is competing in. Judges need to have their own Tabroom accounts (though they do not need NSDA accounts). Given that (on average) you only need one judge for every 4 or 5 students, even if you have each student's parent judge for a couple of tournaments over the course of the entire season it helps. One thought is to put out a volunteer form towards the beginning of each semester for all tournaments that semester. If you go to three tournaments in the fall, require each student bring a parent judge to one of them. Set the volunteer calendar up early and send out reminders as each tournament approaches.

The flipside to using parents is that they will need judge training. There are many options for this and most experienced coaches would be happy to run a training at your school if you just ask! In particular, do not be afraid to reach out to members of the PSC for help. Another great resource is the [judge training videos](#) created by the ASDCA.

At minimum, if you ask your judges to watch the first three videos in that series (total run time: just over an hour) that will help. You can even organize a watch party! The last three videos in that series (run time: 45 minutes) are helpful specifically to debate judges. There are also some short 1-2 page judging primers that cover specifics for each event that can be [found here](#), as well. These are good to review/print out/give to your parents.

Parent judges usually are pretty impressed by what takes place at a tournament, and complimentary food will be made available to them at each tournament. However, if you aren't proactive about finding judges, this can become the single most frustrating thing that goes along with running a program. Loop your kids parents in early so they aren't surprised by this and you are not scrambling for judges at the last minute!

In Conclusion

As mentioned before, the NSDA has a TON of resources available to you as a coach. They constantly add new things to their web site. There are lesson plans, links to other web sites, tutorials, etc. Starting a new team can be overwhelming, but if you take steps to limit the number of events that your students (and you!) are trying to compete in and get admin and parents on board early in the process it helps a lot.

In addition, the goal of the PSC is specifically to help new programs like yours! The grant money is nice, but the expertise of the coaches on the committee is also a resource you should not be afraid to avail yourself of. There is no such thing as a dumb question when it comes to speech & debate, and if a member of the PSC cannot answer it then they will certainly be able to point you to somebody who can. Speech & debate as an activity teaches our students some truly lifelong skills and creates an equal number of lifelong memories. Ultimately we all do this for our students, and the benefits of competing in speech & debate will follow these kids throughout their lives.

Welcome to the wonderful world of Speech & Debate!